

*Nicholas Murray Butler*  
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# Abraham Lincoln

By Nicholas Murray Butler

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It was my good fortune to be born and brought up under the shadow of the name and the fame of Abraham Lincoln. It is family tradition that I was raised in my mother's arms to see him pass, but unfortunately no trace of so memorable an event was left on an infant's memory. His portrait hung on the walls of my childhood home. His words were constantly quoted with reverence, and the Gettysburg Speech was early committed to memory as if it were part of Holy Writ. The still youthful veterans of the Civil War hailed his name with choking voices and with tears in their eyes, and the emancipated slave threw himself on his knees and raised his eyes to Heaven at the sound of Lincoln's name. What manner of man was this who had become the idol of a free people and the very incarnation of their loftiest spirit and their noblest ideals? Years have passed and his stately, somber figure stands out every day more clearly against the background of history. Little by little one comes to understand the full meaning of Lowell's noble description of Lincoln in the Commemoration Ode as

The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,  
New birth of our new soil, the first American,

and then to comprehend the farseeing vision of Stanton when, as he turned his grief-stricken face from the death-bed of Lincoln, he exclaimed: "And now he belongs to the ages."

Surely no citizen of New York can be asked to stand upon the platform at Cooper Union to speak to the public without bearing in mind that that place is famous forever because Abraham Lincoln spoke there. Surely no American can go unmoved to Springfield and stand uncovered before the tomb of Lincoln without feeling that he is at Liberty's greatest shrine. Surely no American can visit the old Cabinet Room at the White House and look from its windows out across the low-lying ground and over the Potomac to the Virginia shore, without remembering that in that room Lincoln struggled with hope and with despair; that in that room Lincoln's breaking heart was compelled to listen to bitter and caustic criticism alike of his policies and purpose, and that from that very window he had been able to see the watch-fires of a hostile army while he counted the hours until he should hear that the capital was still safe. From whatever side we approach Abraham Lincoln we are stirred to our depths by the feeling that in him there dwelt and lived and spoke the very spirit of all that is best in America.

What new thing can be said of Abraham Lincoln? Oratory has long since exhausted its most sonorous periods. Poetry has sung both its dirges and its paeans, rhetoric has piled epithet upon epithet and praise upon praise; yet Abraham Lincoln rises above it all. There is a wonderful line in Mr. Drinkwater's gripping drama: "Lonely is the man who understands," he writes. May not this perhaps be the key to the character of Abraham Lincoln? Abraham Lincoln understood. He saw deep down into the workings of the human heart and he felt, as a skilled physician feels the pulse of his patient, the slightest movement of its elemental passions. He pierced at a glance the workings of the human mind, and with a bit of humor or with an epithet he would strip the mask of hypocrisy, of selfishness, of meanness.

of vanity or of treason from the shrewdest human face, Abraham Lincoln was lonely because he understood. Here is the secret of the pathos of the man; here is the answer to the question why, in our search to understand Lincoln, he so constantly eludes us. He could understand each one of us, but no one of us can fully understand and interpret him.

There is something compelling about the conception of a century of years. One century slips noiselessly into another, to be sure, but human imagination has marked off the centuries as if high barriers were built between them. The nineteenth century, as we can already see, was a century of transition. The political and the social revolutions that were begun as the eighteenth century drew to its close, marched steadily and constructively forward through the nineteenth. The industrial revolution which has transformed our economic and our social life, is the very child of the nineteenth century. That century was a period rich in human discovery and human achievement. It saw luxuries pass first into comforts and then into necessities of life. It watched a constant and striking succession of scientists, historians, poets and prophets from Goethe to Walt Whitman. Yet as we stand off from the nineteenth century and try to interpret its meaning in history, two great figures stand out clearly from all this as representative of its main opposing forces. Each is the figure of a man of modest beginnings, who rose to great eminence and exceptional power and who will always live in history. The one was animated by the ambition to rule, and the other by the zeal to serve. The one gathered up in his own hands all the forces of reaction and hurled them in the face of the onward-marching armies of freedom. The other called upon these armies of freedom to follow where he led, and through them dedicated a nation to the cause that government of the people, by the people, for the people

should not perish from the earth. The one endeavored to turn backward the hands upon the face of the clock of time, the other gladly watched and guarded those hands as they steadily ticked out the progress of the race. The one man was Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, who had conquered Continental Europe at forty, and who died at fifty-two in exile on the lonely rock of St. Helena. The other was Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of the United States, who had yet to achieve his fame at the age when Napoleon was sent into exile, and who was murdered at fifty-six by the devilish spirit of hate, and died amid the tears and the fervent blessings of his stricken fellow-countrymen and of an anxious world.

Great personalities are the embodiment and the spokesmen of great forces. They are more than persons, they are events. Napoleon imposed his mighty will upon France at thirty, an age at which Lincoln was still struggling with poverty and living in relative isolation. Napoleon represents genius at its highest and its worst. His was a stupendous combination of military with civil genius, of wide comprehension with grasp of minutest detail, together with prodigious vitality of mind and body. Lord Dudley wrote of Napoleon: "He has made all future renown impossible." One wonders.

Lincoln, on the other hand, was the true child of his race and of his people. Without formal school training or discipline, without pretence to scholarship, his was a nature in which mind combined with heart and heart with mind, to create a personality unique in all history. His qualities were not super-human, but intensely human. His natural wisdom, his native wit, his deep and sincere human sympathy, his intuitive grasp upon the principles and ideals of American life and government, all united to make him the representative of America before a vote had been cast for his name. The people only acknow-

ledged and ratified what Divine Providence and nature had done. Yet it was of such a man that Wendell Phillips angrily cried out: "Who is this huckster in politics? Who is this county court advocate?"

Napoleon and Lincoln are wide as the poles asunder. The forces that they summoned to their aid and the ideals for which they fought are everlastingly at war. From the very beginning of history the principle of force and the principle of freedom have struggled for mastery over the minds and the hearts of men. All history is the long story of this amazing contest. The tide of battle has ebbed and flowed, now in Asia, now in Africa, now in Europe, now in America, but steadily the armies of freedom have gained ground. Not always have they been able to hold it. Sometimes they have been driven back from advanced positions and a thousand years have passed before a new forward movement could be begun. When Abraham Lincoln said: "This nation can not exist half slave and half free," he was but applying to the United States the principle, equally true, "This world can not exist half despotism and half democracy." A world that produces a Napoleon and a Lincoln must be at war until Napoleon overcomes Lincoln, or Lincoln overthrows Napoleon. In this everlasting conflict each human being must choose his captain and fight until final victory is won. He must choose Napoleon and the rule of force, or Lincoln and the rule of freedom. He can not serve both masters.

Few could have foreseen after Napoleon's banishment that in just a hundred years his challenge would be heard from the lips of another monarch. Few would have believed that after Waterloo there would come a Chateau-Thierry, an Argonne Forest, or a Verdun. Yet they did come, and the old battle was never more fiercely fought than in the years just passed. The cause of freedom, thank God, has conquered that enemy, and

now turns stern-faced and valiant to confront other and subtler foes.

There are among us allies of Napoleon who do not wear military uniform and who do not bear arms. With stealthy tread and whispering voices they go about spreading the doctrine that liberty is dead; that men are bound by invisible chains, and that the law, together with the order which it preserves and the liberty which it ensures, is a curse, not a blessing. It is insinuated that the law is a manacle put upon human hands by those who would dominate through cunning rather than by conquest. All this is to pave the way for a new attack by the disciples of force and of world domination, although the methods are new and the declared purposes quite different. Their aim is an autocracy not of a monarch, but of a mob. These attacks on liberty are just as real and perhaps quite as dangerous as if made on open field of battle with cannon and machine guns and poison gas. To lead us to resist and to repel these new attacks, we summon the spirit of Abraham Lincoln. He knew, few men ever knew so well, that law has been made by free men to protect liberty and to hold open the door of opportunity by the doing of strict justice between man and man. He knew, few ever knew so well, that human liberty is as much in peril from the many as from the one. He knew, few ever knew so well, that obedience to law, respect for law when law is built upon the foundation of civil liberty, is the cornerstone of any form of civil society that is to endure.

Listen to his own words:

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others. . . . Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother



to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap; let it be taught in the schools, in seminaries and in colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the Nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay of all sexes and tongues and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Napoleon was a great law-giver; but for him law was to establish and assure order upon a foundation of force. For Lincoln, law was to establish and assure order upon a foundation of freedom. The nineteenth century was the scene of two great combats over human ideals. The twentieth century is still young and has its history to make. Wise men will expect the old combat to be constantly renewed, for no Utopia is in sight. We must take sides with Napoleon or with Lincoln. The twentieth century Napoleon may be a Lenine or a Trotsky, and the twentieth century Lincoln may be born in some other land than ours, but the driving forces will be the same, the animating ideals will be the same. As the nineteenth century so in the twentieth, the world can not exist half despotism and half democracy. Either Napoleon or Lincoln must win. Every real American hearing in his heart the cry of threatened liberty, will re-echo the old war song, to which the Boys in Blue so cheerfully marched two generations ago: "We are coming, Father Abraham, a hundred million strong."

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